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ABSTRACT

Kentucky's SOS (Sharing Our Selves) Learning Networks are community-owned, volunteer-run, informal learning/development programs incorporating community needs and the skills/knowledge/experience of individuals regardless of academic credentials. The Cooperative Extension Service administers the programs. Interested community members list subjects they would like to study and subjects they know well enough to share with others. A volunteer committee selects learning exchange possibilities and volunteer sharers, develops/distributes a catalog, finds free space throughout the community for classes, registers community members, and conducts a simple evaluation. In 1984, 11,205 participants enrolled in 474 courses such as cheesemaking, creative writing, computer programming, and auto tuneup, and in discussion forums on zone changes, drug abuse, and similar community issues. A statewide survey of 661 people found 45% willing to share talents and hobbies in informal educational settings and 64% interested in attending such sessions; rural inhabitants showed more interest than urban residents; 45% of Network participants listed development of empowerment as an important benefit. SOS Learning Networks overcome limitations of community education by involving a variety of community groups/agencies, maximizing volunteer participation, charging no fees, being administered by the Cooperative Extension Service, and offering classes beyond the scope of usual community education programs. One community's response to the formation of a Learning Network is described as a real life example of the program's appeal. (LFL)

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REVITALIZING RURAL AMERICA: SOS LEARNING NETWORKS

Sam Quick, Martha Nall, Robert Flashman

We are creatures of habit. As educators we have habitaully drawn a clear line between institutionalized, credit learning and informal, non-credit learning. While this division may have been functional in the past, it currently appears to be causing more problems than it solves.

It is important for quality control purposes that teachers be properly accredited. But the satisfactory completion of a certain set of courses may not be an adequate criterion on which to base certification. One of the problems with such an accreditation process is that it largely excludes the potentially important role of informal systems of learning.

Wouldn't it be nice if formalized educational institutions became far more efficient in meansuring the specific competencies that cluster together to form the occupational skills desired when employers advertise for a computer programmer, salesperson or high school teacher? Our emphasis could then be placed on learning itself and skill acquisition rather than on completing a given sequence of formalized, school-based educational preparation.

Why is it particularly important at this time that we begin seriously questioning the assumptions that seem to artificially divide formal and informal learning? There are numerous reasons; a few include:

- Economic hard times, the farm crisis and cutbacks in federal funding are clear signs that we must increasingly strive for the best possible use of all resources.

- Computer technology and video capability have encouraged the line between formal and informal education to become blurred. We can only expect this to increase in the future.

- The need for lifelong, often out-of-school learning has become widespread and is predicted to accelerate. Our traditional, formal institutions of learning will only be able to shoulder a part of this increasing demand for education. An interface with informal learning systems is one way to help meet the expanding demand for education.

With these thoughts as an introduction, let's move on to the concept of SOS Learning Networks and their role in rivitalizing rural America. We will briefly outline what SOS Learning Networks are, how they function and the

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benefits that result. Thus far, Learning Networks have only been used in informal, community-based settings. However, as we present the simple SOSCN model, the principles it is based upon and the success it has yielded, ask yourself questions such as the following:

Why couldn't the same model be used within the domain of formal education? Would it work in your school system? How about in the typical rural high school with non-high school community members participating? As a similar model once flourished as the "free university," could not Learning Networks operate as a vital part of the college or university learning experience, particularly if we developed sophisticated systems of competency testing whose criteria would be actual learning versus so much emphasis on completing specified educational sequences? In a nutshell, would not both formal and informal systems of learning be enriched if a blending of the two were allowed and encouraged?

What Is An SOS Learning Network?

An SOS Learning Network is a community-owned, primarily volunteer-run, informal learning and development program. It is a model of community learning whose time has come. A Learning Network is based on the following simple concepts:

a. We are all learners and we are all teachers.

b. We often learn best when we share with others.

c. Sharing ourselves is one of the keys to creative community development.

d. We grow as we share ourselves.

SOS Learning Networks are also forums for meeting community needs and a mechanism for joining together persons who have common interests. Learning Networks involve grassroots people in decision making and give them a measure of control over their own lives.

SOS stands for Sharing Our Selves. An SOS Learning Network is built upon identified community needs and interests. It is based on the understanding that every individual, regardless of formal academic credentials, has skills, knowledge, talents and/or experience worth sharing.

The learning activities are built around almost any interest: Home Landscaping, Cheesemaking, Beginning Guitar, CPR, Creative Writing, Computer Programming, Picture Framing, Getting Drunk Drivers Off Our Roads, the Lauback Method of Teaching Adults to Read, Tuneups for Sick Cars and a Preschool Parents' Social Hour. Forums for examining issues and concerns facing community life such as zone changes, special needs of the elderly and challenging drug abuse are encouraged. Learning Networks also help launch community ventures such as Food Cooperatives, Farmers Markets and Day Care Cooperatives.

The Learning Networks are established with a simple technique of needs assessment that simultaneously identifies pertinent resources. Representatives of community groups and other interested individuals are given a blank sheet of paper on which to record their name, address, phone number, and a list of three subjects they would like to study. On the back of the paper, they list one or more subjects that they know well enough to teach or share with others.

Typically, a significant overlap exists in what people want to learn and what they are competent to teach. Thus, an impressive array of learning-exchange possibilities is accumulated by this simple assessment technique. The entire procedure is based on the understanding that essentially every individual--regardless of formal academic credentials--has skills, knowledge, talents, or experience worth sharing with others.

After community interests are identified and learning activities and volunteer sharers have been selected, a catalogue of activities is developed and distributed inviting everyone to register and participate. Teachers may or may not have degrees. Meetings are held in free space in churches, schools during "off hours," libraries, parks, homes, banks, and so forth. Then a simple evaluation is conducted and preparations are begun for the next semester's activities. There are usually two semesters of course activities each year.

The results of an independently conducted statewide Kentucky telephone survey (n=661), carried out as part of the SOS Learning Network research project indicates that 45% of the general population are willing to share their ideas, knowledge, talents and hobbies with interested others in an informal educational setting. When this 45% was looked at more closely, it was found that race, home ownership and geographic area did not affect people's willingness to share skills with others. Those living in rural areas (50%) were more interested than those living in non-rural areas (43%). However the rural/non-rural difference was not statistically significant. Sex, age and marital status significantly affected responses. Males (51%) were more interested in sharing skills than females (40%). Persons between ages 20-40 (61%) were most likely to be willing to share skills and persons over 65 least likely (28%). Separated and single persons fall into the category of most likely (59%) to share skills with others, with widows and widowers (23%) being the least likely to share their skills.

When the 45% of the population who were willing to share their skills were asked if they would do it free, 97% said yes. Taken as a whole, this research indicates that a large portion of the general population is willing to altruistically share of themselves in areas where they have both the interest and capability.

This same survey showed that 64% of those randomly interviewed would be interested in attending a free, informal, educational program where people share their skills and hobbies.

An additional factor was studied, the factor of empowerment, which refers to the generation of a positive sense of control over one's life. In a statewide evaluation of participants in existing SOS Learning Networks, approximately 45% said they had developed more control over their lives as a

direct result of their participation in a Learning Network. This ability to create a feeling of empowerment has repeatedly emerged as an important ingredient in the success of Kentucky's system of Learning Networks, and is seen as an important key in the educational revitalization of rural America.

Since an SOS Learning Network is a free community learning program, it becomes a magnet for attracting expressions of enthusiasm and gestures of altruism such as donations of expertise, materials, and free newspaper, radio and TV advertisements. Reflecting this spirit of giving, the goals of an SOS Learning Network are: to strengthen families; to help individuals of all ages and backgrounds share and develop their skills and ideas; to encourage a sense of self-sufficiency, self-worth and identity with community; and to awaken the "can do" spirit. Currently there are some 20 Kentucky Learning Networks operating in primarily rural communities.

Last year 11,205 participants enrolled in 474 courses, with many courses involving 3 to 6 consecutive sessions. In addition to documented attitude and behavior changes, using the very conservative figure of $15/course typically charged for community education courses, it could be suggested that SOSLN participants saved $168,075. Volunteer time totaled over 5,000 hours.

A Real Life Example

A county home economics agent with the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service described one community's response to the formation of a Learning Network:

At our first steering committee meeting, the eight members of the committee planned and developed a program in about four hours. Within a week, volunteer teachers had been secured for 32 classes, and all but one of the course descriptions were ready for publication. The local newspaper devoted one edition to the Learning Network, and free copies were sent to every household in the county. In addition, the newspaper provided extra copies for our use, which were distributed to public places, put up in store windows, etc.

The local radio station ran free announcements of the program every day, 10 times per day, until the day of registration. On the day of registration, they broadcast a reminder every 30 minutes that this was the day to register for classes.

By 7:15 a.m. on registration day, lines of people had formed outside the Extension Office door, waiting for the office's 8:00 a.m. opening. All told, over 800 persons were registered for courses. Not wanting to say no to people who wanted to register for classes which were already filled, the committee set up additional classes. Teachers were more than willing to schedule additional classes, often feeling it was an honor to have so many people wanting to take their course.

Community Education: Limitations Of Existing Models

Numerous educational programs that fall under the general category of "Community Education" have been reviewed. Though most of the programs were strong in many respects, five areas of relative weakness were found to be common across the majority of the models reviewed:

(1) The potential for co-sponsorship among various community groups and agencies was poorly realized.

(2) There appeared to be a relatively low level of clientele involvement in the initial and ongoing operation of the community education program.

(3) The cost to the participant of a non-credit course of short duration was often sufficiently high (e.g., $30) to prohibit or discourage participation by certain segments of the population.

(4) The programs often appeared to be built around a newly created and costly administrative superstructure with substantial overhead.

(5) The scope of activities falling under the banner of community education was generally somewhat limited.

The SOS Learning Network model overcomes all five of these limitations. Specifically:

(1) The program is designed to strongly encourage multiple co-sponsorship and involvement by a variety of community groups and agencies.

(2) Initial and ongoing clientele involvement is maximized by extensive volunteer participation. This is accomplished in part by relying on a representative and well-balanced local steering committee and in part by seeking out capable, non-paid, volunteer teachers.

(3) The cost to participants is free. In certain courses, however, small materials or activity fees are charged.

(4) The administrative vehicle for the implementation of the model is the Cooperative Extension Service--an established nationwide public agency specializing in informal community education.

(5) The scope of SOS Learning Network activity exceeds that of traditional community education programs. For instance, it encourages public forums and debates on issues facing the community such as maintaining a downtown neighborhood. The model is also designed to put individuals with similar concerns in touch with each other to work together toward a common goal, e.g., the establishment of a day care center.

The Cooperative Extension Service

The Cooperative Extension Service, which developed and nurtured Kentucky's Learning Networks, serves as a model for sponsoring a system of Learning Networks. The Service, established in 1914, is a university-linked organization that carries on diverse out-of-school education programs in all 3,000 U.S. counties.

The Extension System includes a vast network of grass-roots support. Nationally, an estimated 2 million people volunteer each year to supplement the efforts of CES professionals.

Although the SOSLN Model was developed in the context of the Cooperative Service, and although the programs are sponsored by the Cooperative Extension Service, the basic idea has been around for a long time--perhaps far back into the history of early mankind. We believe that this timelessness of freely sharing one's knowledge and skills can play a timely and vital role in our creative response to the current educational needs of rural America.